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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BASRAH 000027

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: BASRAH AVOIDS HUMANITARIAN CRISIS WHILE PREPARING FOR FUTURE  
CRISIS

BASRAH 00000027 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Howell Howard, Regional Coordinator, Regional  
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C/REL MCFI) SUMMARY: Limited Government of Iraq (GOI) planning and poor coordination with the Coalition for the potential humanitarian consequences of the March 24 "Charge of the Knights" operation in Basrah left all concerned parties--most importantly, Basrawis themselves--unprepared for the resulting economic disruptions. Fortunately, kinetic operations were short-lived, and a humanitarian crisis never materialized. Essentials such as basic foods, potable water, medical supplies, and cooking gas remained generally available, albeit at sharply increased prices, but distribution was a challenge because many Basrawis could not travel in the city.

12. (C/REL MCFI) SUMMARY CONTINUED: Recognizing the risk of a humanitarian crisis when news of the operation broke, officials from Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I) and the Coordinator for Economic Transition in Iraq (CETI) engaged colleagues in the GOI, the interagency, Coalition partners, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) to assess and address the situation. The GOI and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) played key roles distributing the multilateral assistance. GOI, ISF, MNF-I, CETI, UK, and UNAMI humanitarian assistance officials are now coordinating in Baghdad and Basrah through regular meetings and video teleconferences. All hope that future ISF operations in Basrah will be targeted, well executed, and short lived, as an April 8 deadline for militias to turn in their heavy weapons expires. Preparations, especially by the Basrawis themselves, have left the city better positioned if a resumption of hostilities leads to more acute economic disruption. But much work remains to be done. END SUMMARY

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BACKGROUND: PM TAKES EVERONE BY SURPRISE, EXCEPT JAM  
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13. (C/REL MCFI) On March 24, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and an entourage of national security ministers and advisors traveled to Basrah, purportedly to assess preparations for a plan by Basrah Operations Commander LTG Mohan Hafith Fahad al-Farji to root out militias. Without notifying Mohan, Basrah Governor Mohammed Wa'eli (with whom the PM has strained relations), the Basrah Provincial Council (PC), local Directors General (DGs) of the services ministries, or the Coalition well in advance of his intentions, Maliki instead ordered the ISF to deliver a knockout blow to the JAM militia. Based on Basrah's Provincial Iraqi Control arrangements, Mohan is responsible for the security portfolio, while the Governor and the DGs, in

coordination with the PC are responsible for providing public goods and services to the populace. Word of an imminent offensive leaked to JAM, and fighters attacked the IA, seized key bridges, and planted improvised explosive devices (IEDs) throughout the city. Major combat operations ground to a stalemate until an interim ceasefire was brokered on March 31. Many parts of the city remained outside of IA control.

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THE GOI AND THE COALITION COORDINATE A RESPONSE  
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¶4. (SBU) The unforeseen hostilities caught even Basrah's conflict-accustomed residents unawares. Essential service providers and private citizens took no special steps to stockpile medical supplies, food, potable water, and cooking fuel. MNF-I and CETI officials immediately recognized the potential for a humanitarian crisis to materialize if the fighting lasted and reached out to counterparts in the GOI, ISF, REO Basrah, Multi-National Corp Iraq (MNC-I) C9, Multi-National Division South East (MND-SE) J9, UK Basrah Embassy Office, UK-led Basrah PRT, and UNAMI to coordinate a humanitarian assistance effort.

¶5. (SBU) A Baghdad-based coordinating committee stood up quickly, including two high-level GOI officials: Dr. Ali al-Yasiri from the Office of the National Security Advisor (NSA) and Mr. Kifa al-Amin, advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh. On March 31, Dr. Yasiri and Mr. Amin traveled to Basrah--with UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG) David Shearer and officers from both USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA)--to assess the situation and develop a humanitarian assistance program. MND-SE, the Basrah PRT, and the REO supported all aspects of their efforts.

¶6. (C/REL MCFI) Ongoing fighting challenged the humanitarian

BASRAH 00000027 002.2 OF 003

coordination group's efforts to assess the situation, but local officials and NGOs provided much needed information and atmospherics. The day after their arrival in Basrah, Dr. Yasiri and Mr. Amin led efforts to develop a fifteen-point list of priorities to address the humanitarian situation, focusing on health, food, water, and fuel.

¶7. (C/REL MCFI) The twelve hospitals in the Basrah city urban area continued to function, under great adversity, throughout the battle. Fighting prevented some staff members from reporting to work, with those doctors and nurses caught in the hospitals as hostilities began having to sleep in the hospital and work around the clock. The facilities needed additional trauma supplies (reports of wounded exceeded 1,000), medications for chronic disease sufferers, potable water, and fuel for generators. Militia tactics also disrupted ambulance service: JAM fighters fired on some emergency vehicles and misappropriated others to transport and plant IEDs. Basrah's 80 smaller health clinics mostly stopped functioning altogether, with their staffs unable to commute and their limited supplies exhausted.

¶8. (C/REL MCFI) Markets remained relatively well stocked with food, but many Basrawis could not leave their homes to shop and, when they could, prices had risen sharply. Prices for some fresh produce and other perishables reportedly increased by 500-700 percent at the peak of the fighting and then decreased to double their pre-battle levels. A kilo of tomatoes, for example, sold for roughly 500 Iraqi Dinars (ID) on March 23, ID 2,500 during the fighting, and ID 1,000 by April 4. To help ensure adequate supplies, the ISF exempted food from a general shutdown of land points of entry (POEs) on the Kuwaiti and Iranian borders. (NOTE: Militia reportedly smuggled newly manufactured weapons from Iran to Iraq on some produce trucks. END NOTE.) Prices for most items presently remain at their April 4 levels, elevated by Basrawis hoarding in case the

fighting resumes, according to local media and NGO contacts. Most Basrawis rely in whole or part on the Ministry of Trade (MOT) administered Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides monthly rations of wheat flour, rice, dried milk, and other items. PDS operations were temporarily disrupted because truck drivers would not or could not travel from Basrah to the Port of Umm Qasr (PUQ), through which most PDS commodities are imported. Ship unloading faced similar delays due to absence of a work force.

¶9. (C/REL MCFI) Basrah's water system continued to function throughout most of the fighting but briefly shut down due to a power cut. Basrah's main water supply is not potable, however. Those who can afford it normally purchase their drinking water from private delivery trucks but found themselves needing to boil tap water instead, which in turn increased demand for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), normally used for cooking. A can of LPG sold for ID 5,000 on March 23, ID 25,000 during the fighting, and ID 12,000 as of April 4. Many of Basrah's poorest residents--e.g., those in the southwest neighborhoods and Sadrist strongholds of Hyyaniyah and al-Jameat--were hit hardest: they do not have main water service at all and normally rely on aid agencies such as UNICEF and Mercy Corps to deliver their water.

¶10. (C/REL MCFI) Once apprised of the most pressing issues, the GOI and ISF--with significant engagement by urgently embedded MND-SE and MNC-I staff--played important roles in addressing short-term needs and logistical difficulties. The Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) and its Basrah branch ensured that local banks had sufficient liquidity for wage earners to draw their salaries. The Iraqi Air Force delivered five tons of medical supplies from MND-SE J9 reserves to the downtown Basrah Palace, which also served as the PM's operation center. Trucks from the Ministries of Defense and Health delivered trauma supplies to the Az Zubayr hospital. The IA distributed 4,000 halal food rations and 200,000 liters of bottled water to the Hyyaniyah-Jameat district. The Ministries of Trade and Transport cooperated to move PDS commodities out of the PUQ and into the city, their efforts facilitated by the IA taking over port security from the militia-infiltrated Facilities Protection Service (FPS). For his part, Governor Wa'eli put his water and electricity crews on the street as soon as possible. These initiatives, together with substantial support from the Coalition, the UN, aid agencies, and local NGOs helped avert localized humanitarian crises, but the relatively quick agreement of an uneasy ceasefire was the key to preventing broader, more profound suffering.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C/REL MCFI) The GOI, the ISF, the Coalition, the UN and,

BASRAH 00000027 003.2 OF 003

most important, Basrawis themselves have seized the tenuous truce to prepare for a possible resumption of kinetic operations. The PM has announced that USD 100 million in assistance will be made immediately available for Basrah, though early indications are that this will be used for longer term reconstruction, or short term employment projects, not humanitarian assistance per se. To implement the funds, the GOI has created a Baghdad-based coordination committee involving key service ministries--oil, electricity, trade, transport, and water resources--led by Minister of Justice Dr. Safa al-Safi. Deputy Ministers from these ministries are planning to come to Basrah in the next couple days. All the interested GOI, Coalition, and international parties continue to coordinate their activities in Baghdad and in Basrah and will feed input into al-Safi's effort. Most important, Basrawis have been stockpiling food, water, and medical supplies, which should help prevent acute shortages in the first 72 hours of any rejoined Battle of Basrah.

¶12. (C/REL MCFI) But much work remains to be done. Early

intelligence reports suggest that, if fighting were to resume, it could be fiercer and longer lasting than the recent hostilities. JAM fighters remain entrenched in the poorest neighborhoods most at risk for a humanitarian crisis. By some indications the next phase of ISF operations could involve more invasive, house-to-house street fighting that could devastate those poor neighborhoods where many IEDs are emplaced.

¶13. (SBU) The GOI, the ISF, the Coalition, the UN, and the international aid agencies should further formalize their collaboration. Contacts made among representatives should evolve into institutionalized relationships among their respective entities, so that effective coordination outlasts the presence of particular individuals. Also crucial will be preparations to assist Basrah's poorest, most marginalized, most vulnerable residents, of whom local NGOs estimate there are 4,000 families. These benighted souls--many, again, found in Sadrist strongholds--are dependent on aid agencies for food and potable water at the best of times. Geography, logistics, and violence may cut them off completely if fighting resumes in their neighborhoods, unless clear plans are in place to ensure they receive the assistance they need.

HOWARD